

Stress, Your Immune System and the Coronavirus

By James Porter/Edited by CHI Health EAP

Sheldon Cohen, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, has spent his entire career studying the effect of psychological stress and social support on immunity and susceptibility to infectious disease. His studies and hundreds of other studies like his have proven that chronic stress lowers our body's ability to fight off viruses and other pathogens that the body might encounter through cuts, scrapes, human contact and simply breathing the air.

Just because we are exposed to a virus, doesn't mean we will get sick. A healthy immune system will fight off the invaders without us ever knowing we had it. Chronic stress weakens our immune system and makes us more vulnerable to these invaders. Obviously, during this Covid-19 crisis, we want our immune systems to be functioning at peak levels. Here are four measures that you can help you do that:

1. Lower stress. According to stress expert, Dr. Robert Sapolsky of Stanford University, "Sustained major stressors drive immune system function down to 40 to 70% below baseline." When this happens often enough, the immune system can become dysregulated, and no longer functions properly. Lowering stress with simple techniques like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and visualization (as well as the suggestions below) gives the immune system a respite from stress and can prevent it from becoming dysregulated.
2. Exercise. According to author and Harvard Medical School Professor, John Ratey, M.D., "stress and age depress the immune system, while exercise strengthens it."
3. Go to bed early. According to William Dement, M.D., author of the book *The Promise of Sleep*, "Quality of sleep before infection is statistically significant in determining whether someone gets a cold." There's definitely a connection between chronic insomnia and immune system dysfunction.
4. Meditate. Two groups of 25 people got a flu shot. One group had just taken a mindfulness meditation class while the other group had not. The meditators immune system reaction to the flu shot was significantly stronger than the control group who hadn't meditated.

So now you have some ideas for how to attack this problem of Covid-19 from the inside out. Everything outlined above will also help you lower stress. In this way you will have applied a one-two punch to the virus by increasing your immune system functioning and decreasing your stress.

To speak with an EAP counselor, please call (402) 398-5566 or (888) 847-4975.